

AN HONEST LIFE

A novel

By

J F CONROY

An Honest Life © Copyright 2021 by J F Conroy. All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage or retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author. The only exception is by a reviewer, who may quote short excerpts in a review. This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events is entirely coincidental. J F Conroy.

For information contact: jfconroyinfo@gmail.com

Edited by Emma Walsh @ The Literary Professionals.

Cover design by Bespoke Book Covers.

ISBN: 978-1-83853-563-6

Dedication

This story is in memory of Jessica McCann and Stephen Fahy of Bishop Thomas Grant School, Streatham, South London. Jessica and I were in the same class in our first year of secondary school. I remember Jessica being bright and bubbly. Sadly, she was tragically killed in a road traffic accident before she arrived at school one morning.

Stephan Fahy and I grew up together in the same primary school before we attended secondary school. I remember him for his great sense of humour. When Stephen was a teenager, he unexpectedly died of meningitis during the summer holidays.

I have often thought about both of these friends and their families and the life they could have led.

CHAPTER 1

Holmewood Road was a street of single-fronted, terraced houses which backed onto row after row of similar homes. It was located north of Dublin, not too far from the main route linking to the airport. The houses were originally a sandstone colour, but following years of industrial pollution, they resembled a tired, smoky-grey colour. The windows and doors had a glazed, red-bricked surround which contrasted strangely with the wooden window frames and porch. It was a strange mix of styles that stood out more for its incongruity than for its consistency, odd in a street full of houses that were all the same.

Whenever it rained, the bricks gave off a rainbow marble glow bringing the old facias alive. In autumn, when the sun was low, the sky would turn an earthy copper colour, visible from one end of the street. The shimmering effect would be quite breathtaking, as if finishing its curtain call for the year before winters' early nights loomed in. Closeby was a factory that produced coffee, ideal for supplying the many café franchises at the airport. On a dry day, with a light wind, the aroma of fresh coffee beans wafted on the breeze.

Martin and Bridget Lynch lived at Number 22 with their two children: Shane, seventeen, and Sinead, thirteen. A council-owned property, it had been home to many tenants over its lifetime. As you entered the house, inside the porch above the door, children of the past had etched their names into the chalky brickwork. Amongst the array of Marys', 'Darrens' and 'Decco + Brenda forever' scrawls was an inappropriate limerick. The indentation had been coloured-in with a black felt tip pen to ensure longevity. It read: 'Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water, Jill the dill forgot the pill, and now they have a daughter'. Over the years, as representatives from the education board had visited the house to address young Shane's truancy, not a single person

had ever overlooked the limerick, and yet it remained.

The large front window was a bay window with a worn seat covered in cushions. It was one of the most comfortable places in the house and had the best view of the goings-on of the street. It also had the permanent feature of a glass ashtray tucked in the corner, always full of cigarette butts and discarded chewing gum. Over the years, each of the panes at the top of the window had been smashed in turn. Once, a football had been kicked awry. Another time, Shane had lost his keys and broken in. A pigeon impact had once smashed the centre pane. The neighbours often joked about the pigeons becoming disorientated due to the pungent smell of coffee throughout the neighbourhood, causing them to nosedive into vulnerable houses. The Lynch's house hadn't been the only one to suffer such damage. Repairs, and the apparent need for repairs, were common throughout the street.

The property had needed upgrading for many years but had been left to decline by the county council. The Lynches had reported many complaints and requested repairs; each request was lost in the council department vacuous loop. Years of being ignored meant they eventually gave up trying, and the property was slowly falling apart.

Number 22 stood out from the street for all the wrong reasons. Neighbours were reluctant to park their cars outside for fear of damage by the drunken exploits of late-night drinkers or teenagers throwing their bikes down on the pavement and accidentally scoring the paintwork. Over recent years many residents had purchased their homes from the council. Extensions, double-glazing and porched doors added value to the properties and emphasised the lack of attention given to others.

As the street improved, a small neighbourhood watch scheme developed, designed to improve the street's reputation. The committee would discuss amongst themselves the best way to approach the Lynches. Bridget was often at work on different shifts, and the only response they got from Martin was, 'Will it cost us anything?' so it wasn't long before improvement of the area continued without the Lynches.

It was the kind of neighbourhood where everyone knew everyone else. Children would knock for each other to come out and play. Mothers would enter their neighbours' open doors to borrow anything from milk to shampoo. Despite the hardships and the varying degrees of decline, it was a good neighbourhood. Good people lived in these houses. Every family

on the street had their own challenges, but for the most part, they looked out for each other and the kids. They did their best with what they had.

Across the road, at number 27, lived Mr and Mrs Mercer. They had lived on the street for decades and witnessed many changes. Retired now, their garden got all their attention. Thick foliage climbed the fences on either side of them and offered privacy from neighbours. Within the haven of peace, bedding plants and brightly-coloured flowers provided an Edenesque feel for the relatively short summer period. The scent of lilies permeated the patio area, making eating outdoors a pleasant prospect during warmer months. However, on occasion, their tranquil setting was interrupted by the pitter-patter of canine paws cantering around the barren yard next door. Intermittently, the peaceful silence was sundered by the neighbour's dog, Nugget, as he leisurely strolled towards the perfect spot, circled, hesitated, then noisily emptied his bowels, leaving behind a putrid mess that demonstrated the lack of due care and attention given to his diet. Picture-perfect peace on the Mercer's patio could be ruined in the blink of an eye as following Nugget's release, kamikaze flies divebombed the mess. Yet, despite this unpleasantness, the Mercers were one of the few neighbours who had good relations with the Lynches. Mrs Mercer looked out for Bridget and Sinead. With no children of her own, she doted on the girls across the road and treated Sinead like a much-loved granddaughter.

Holmewood Road led into Holmewood Gardens. The terraced houses formed a triangle shape with an open green in the middle. A willow tree dominated the centre of the green, its pendulous branches forming a canopy that shielded loitering teenagers from prying eyes. Empty rizla packets and cigarette butts littered the base of the tree. This was the place the teenagers hung out at late into the summer nights. The smell of cannabis giving away their presence until the midges became too much to bear, and they moved on, searching for the next safe, sacred space.

With its timber decking and modern equipment, the children's playground was the most popular spot for them then. Shielded on one side by a thicket of trees, once the younger kids were gone, it was the teenagers' territory. In Spring, the open green came alive with the blossoming of hundreds of incandescent bluebells. However, their fate was short-lived, but for a few weeks, they continued to litter the grass verges in rows bringing radiance to the neighbourhood.

In the autumn, when the leaves turned golden with rusty hues, the

children took great delight in stamping and crunching on the banks of lost foliage as they passed through the park. These natural adornments made the area quite pretty, and at certain times of the year, the neighbours felt quite proud of where they lived, despite its lacking. On the bend of Holmewood Gardens, a convenience store partnered with a hardware store stood. It had a large car park that had the unfortunate capacity to draw in local chancers who either loitered outside or tried to cause trouble inside. However, once the chancers realised who the owner was and their swelling had gone down, due respect was usually given.

Across the road from the store had once stood the single source of employment for locals for decades, the local aggregate factory. After its closure, the building decayed quickly over the years as local kids found another space to congregate. Yet its demise had rejuvenated the air quality in the surrounding areas. Though no more smoke fumes emanated from its chimneys, the houses nearby continued to show the stains of its presence. A decision to demolish the site for health and safety reasons pleased the locals. The land was sold off, and a discount supermarket called Safeway and a modest primary school took its place to cater for the overpopulated area. Safeway provided the locals with alternative employment opportunities and the mothers with discount prices on the food shopping. All the services a community could need to thrive.

The supermarket received plaudits from the full time mothers for its low prices and convenient café that served as a time killer in the morning school runs. Individuals of the group showed their disapproval of having to slot a euro into their trolleys for use. Due to a magnetic grid in the car park exit, it restricted them from moving the trolleys off the premises. This faced them with taking their shopping via mini cabs or the bus service. Pandemonium broke out when they discovered that a 22 cent levy charge was incurred on their shopping bill for each carrier bag required. This belittlement meant not only were they forced to carry their shopping home, but they were also charged for the privilege of it.

As the school became embedded in the fabric of the community, different factions of parents emerged. There were those from the local area whose kids often arrived late, without lunch and missing books. Some children walked to school by both mothers and fathers due to the chronic unemployment in the area, leaving both parents at home.

Then there were the children who came farther afield. They

were delivered in cars by their mothers, typically stay-at-home mothers with the luxury of working husbands dressed smartly in the uniform of the day; skinny jeans and UGG boots, and a 'no-makeup' look that denied the effort gone into presentation.

The local mothers smacked gum as they flicked through Facebook threads, laughing uproariously as they shared jokes and comments. Some of the out-of-town mothers took issue with the dress and behaviour of these mothers. Their too-tight leggings, visible G-strings, and regular pyjama bottoms many sizes too small offended their sensibilities and were brought to the Principle's attention them of suitable attire when escorting their children to school. Letters were sent out to all parents reminding them of suitable attire when escorting their children to school.

CHAPTER 2

The Telegraph, the area's local and much-frequented pub, stood proud, majestically flaunting its proximity within the neighbourhood with disdain. Despite its demise, a major overhaul was yet to take place. It was a large L-shaped pub, accessed by the main entrance on the street corner, with a large car park behind it.

The main entrance boasted hefty, solid-oak doors leading into the large main bar to the saloon's right. To the right of the entrance, in the hallway, was an unobtrusive doormarked 'private'. It led up a staircase to a function room. Admittance was by invitation only.

Inside, the function space was an unpretentious bar, backed by mirrored glass reflecting the recessed optic bottles, giving the illusion the bar was double in size. The room had a comfortable and traditional feel, with wooden beams that led the way to a stone fireplace at the far end of the room. Aged, leather chairs offered comfort to those lucky enough to gain admittance. Asides from the usual birthday parties and funeral gatherings, the private bar hosted various events, poker games, and meetings that took place off the record and out of sight.

Nicknamed The Graft, it and the hardware store were owned by Declan Hennessey, a Dubliner raised but not born. A businessman of sorts, he ran one of Dublin's most notorious organised criminal and money-lending outfits. It spanned the Northside of the city, from Drumcondra through to Ballymun and up to the airport. If punters in the neighbourhood had a request for a particular item, Declan had a team of personnel who could locate and secure that item at a reduced cost. It was an enterprise that had enormous appeal and variety and ran entirely on cash revenue.

Declan was a revered local rogue with a deserved reputation having a short fuse and a violent temper. He rarely had cause to use it though, as he surrounded himself with associates who were more than willing to

do his bidding. The Telegraph served as a front for Declan's numerous business activities. The pub itself ran a profit that diverted suspicion away from his other activities.

One of his more sacred personal events was the Saturday night poker game that ran by invitation only. Guests would congregate in the main bar downstairs to loosen up before being escorted upstairs from around 9 pm. A discrete pat-down by the bouncers ensured the integrity of the night and the safety of the patrons. Declan's door staff ran a tight ship, and guests knew better than bringing a friend to the poker sessions.

Everyone knew the function room was off-limits on Saturdays, and it had been in practice for so long that it was never questioned why a 50th birthday party had to take place on a Friday or Sunday night. The locals knew the score, and if Declan, on the rare occasion, had to take care of any unruly behaviour, there was never any call for the Guards to pay a visit. A gentleman's agreement existed with the Staff Sergeant on duty to give Declan a heads-up if there were any complaints.

While the downstairs bar served legitimate spirits and liquors, the upstairs bar served illegal and contraband liquors that came in via Declan's connections in Dublin port. Declan had Eastern European associates in the UK who delivered into the Irish capital's docks discreetly. Though it had been risky at first, Declan had trialled the arrangement with trusted acquaintances to scope out the operation. Once satisfied it was safe to collect, he had the contraband delivered straight to his hardware store and stocked in its basement. The dry basement served as a perfect location to store stock.

Initially, it was just liquor and cigarettes. However, due to the influx of European criminals operating in and out of Ireland, new opportunities had opened up to stocking all kinds of fake branded clothing. Initially, Declan had been reluctant to branch out (booze and cigarettes would never go out of fashion), but it was his son Kieran who had opened his eyes to the demand for fake fashion amongst the youth on the streets.

Declan had met his wife Kathleen in his early thirties and was smitten with her from the off. Kathleen had been as attractive in her personality as she was in her looks, and many had pursued her. When she first met Declan, it hadn't exactly been love at first sight. Yet, despite Declan's shortcomings – he was a risk-taker and made rash decisions – his confidence and boldness won her over. Kathleen felt safe with him, in spite

of the danger that surrounded him. As time went by and their son Kieran arrived, however, the novelty of his bad-boy image quickly wore off. Kathleen's parents had never approved of him, and as their relationship developed, their concerns became more vocal.

They thought she was throwing away a prosperous career in teaching and the chance to marry well. Instead, she took up with a risky man who dabbled in questionable business affairs. In the beginning, Kathleen's family had intervened and tried to persuade her to hold off on the marriage. However, it was easy for Kathleen to dismiss their concerns about Declan as prejudice, as Declan was a black Irish man living on the fringe of the criminal underworld in Dublin in the 80s. Never welcomed into her family, it was easier to assume it was his colour that was the problem, not his rogue lifestyle, and perhaps it was both reasons that were enough for her family to reject him. Yet despite it all, or maybe because of it, their relationship flourished.

At first, Kathleen rebelled against their disapproval. Kathleen felt loyal to Declan. They had their ups and downs, but unlike Declan's arguments with his punters, he never threatened or raised a finger to Kathleen. He adored her and always kept his cool around her. Their married life started in the flat above The Telegraph, but it wasn't long before living over a bar lost its appeal. Their flat soon became the headquarters for many of Declan's 'business' meetings, and to Kathleen's great dismay, her home became an open house.

After about a year of gentle hints about needing their privacy going unnoticed, things came to a head when Declan held a meeting in their front room with eight of his associates. To their delight and Declan's horror, they soon realised just how 'private' the space was when mid-conversation Kathleen, with a well-timed entrance, sashayed out of the bathroom with just a towel wrapped around her waist. She walked through the sitting room deliberately, slowly and unselfconsciously. Her slim figure and full breasts stopped time as, feigning nonchalance, she excused herself to Declan's associates who sat open-mouthed, afraid to look and yet afraid to miss a thing. She blinked in astonishment in front of the team of men and spoke innocently, 'Oh sorry, lads. I hadn't realised there was a meeting going on in here. Don't mind me, carry on as you were, pretend I'm not here.' Wiggling her hips as she swept past them, she dipped her head to hide a smirk. Declan was enraged, simmering with anger at her

exhibitionism but knowing she had made a fair point.

Later, when he had cleared the men out and started to think seriously about a move, she apologised with sarcastic sympathy. 'I hope they were not offended by a half-naked woman walking into their meeting place,' she asked, mock innocently, 'Please God, they'll be able to look me in the eye the next time we meet.' Like a gentleman, Declan graciously gave in, and six weeks later, they moved into their new home.

The flat above the pub had a service entrance at the back that led to a hallway and staircase back down to the first floor. Divided into bedsits, one room was set up as a break room for bar staff. Previous employees had vanished mid-shift whilst on breaks, so this new space kept staff on-site and in sight. The staff room had a single bed often used as a dumping ground for clothes and knock-off gear in transit. A bland grey sofa slotted under the window facing a television and a mini kitchen kept tea and coffee supplies. Tenants were forbidden from entering the pub via the main entrance as it was deemed inappropriate. CCTV monitors were installed in the break room, and these covered all areas downstairs and recorded goings-on. With a business like Declan's, it paid to be vigilant.

The pub ran much like clockwork. Declan had a low turnover of core staff and left things very much in the capable hands of his manager, Dillon. Regular nights took place without fail, traditional music on Sunday evenings, bingo on Tuesdays, a DJ on Saturdays. There was no need to fix what wasn't broken. On the rare occasions that a booking was cancelled, disgruntled noises were made to Dillon about the missed event and the craftiest, and most persistent complainers got a free drink to quieten them down.

One regular customer, who knew the benefit of complaining at the right time in a busy pub, was Old Man Mick. An elderly gentleman who had frequented the pub for years, he took it upon himself to polish the tables and collect the empties for no reason and over the years became a sort of unofficial custodian. Nobody quite knew his age as his face was puce from years of heavy drinking. Age spots covered his arms as he cleared glasses with laboured breathing that revealed rotten teeth that would have been a good advert on cigarette boxes. Dillon granted Old Man Mick a free pint each evening, and he felt valuable and necessary. Even though he could be a nuisance from time to time, Declan welcomed free labour and a second set of – albeit rheumy – eyes on things.

AN HONEST LIFE

Keeping things running smoothly was important for Declan. He had no desire to expand, take on new territory or conquer new shores. As the years went by he had fallen into contentment, lost his ambition and unfortunately, taken his eye somewhat off the ball. Little was he to know that a course of events was about to follow that would teach him a valuable lesson about the consequences of not paying attention.

CHAPTER 3

Declan was as Irish as they came, but his inauspicious start haunted him. His parents, Clara and Bernard, had travelled from Trinidad in 1960 with dreams and aspirations of a new life in the UK. The harsh reality of their arrival soon overrode their ambition. The unwelcoming stares and the unfamiliarity of one-word answers to basic questions dented their confidence. This was not the dream life they had envisaged. They found the country hostile, the people suspicious, and the opportunities limited. To complicate their life was the unplanned birth of Declan in their first year. Unmarried and broke, Bernard couldn't hold a job down for any length of time due to excessive drinking. He felt hard done by and fuelled by drink he would often say, 'We came from the warmth to live in this cold, unforgiving country.'

With work and money scarce, soon they had nowhere to live. Clara had turned from an optimistic and resourceful young woman into the broken and fearful wife of an alcoholic. Eventually, when things became unbearable, and with nowhere to live and nowhere to turn, she hopelessly left her three-month-old baby at an orphanage in South London. The plan was to return, but neither parent ever came back.

As the nuns inadvisably named the boy, Declan was one of three Black babies in the orphanage. These babies were harder to place with families back then, but by chance, a desperate Irish couple, Donal and Geraldine Walsh, who had been working in London, had registered with the charity. God had not blessed the couple with children. On their scheduled appointment, they were told about Declan whilst on a tour of the orphanage.

He was a young baby boy with a strong Irish name, and before they ever met him, they were keen. They immediately fell in love with this beautiful baby. His huge dark eyes locked on to Geraldine's like

magnets the second she picked him up, and his fate was sealed. The adoption documentation was processed, and after passing the assessment criteria, they travelled back home to Dublin to start life with their new family.

Their welcome return was as joyful as it was surprising. Friends, family and their new congregation welcomed Declan into the fold. Declan was instantly accepted as part of the community despite a few comments and stares from small-minded people. When Declan was six years old, his adoptive father Donal passed away from a sudden heart attack. With no income, Geraldine was forced to move to a much cheaper and less salubrious neighbourhood. Their lives changed utterly. Geraldine found she had to harden up her son in the face of the vagaries of their new life. Her wisdom and common sense taught Declan to rise above the challenges of their new harsh position in the streets of inner-city Dublin.

1976

Galivanting around the streets with friends, Declan often drew attention from the Gardai. One evening a group of rowdy teenagers were up to mischief, messing and calling things out to women on their way home from work. Officers on patrol saw them, and Declan stood out immediately. Keeping an eye on them, the officers watched them from their patrol car across the street. Geraldine had warned Declan many times that he would always stand out, and as such, his behaviour had to be beyond reproach.

Declan mainly had kept to himself and did no more messing than would be expected of a young lad his age. He knew well to be courteous if ever stopped by the Guards. He was surprised and prepared when he noted the patrol car following him home after the group dispersed. It slowed to a crawl beside him for 20 metres before stopping ahead of him. Two Guards stepped out.

The older, more experienced one raised a hand to indicate Declan to stop. 'Good evening, young man.'

'Good evening, Guard, and a bitter cold one it is at that,' Declan replied cheerfully. The second Garda was clearly a recruit. He stood awkwardly, glancing at his senior colleague expectantly, as he referred to his pocket notebook to camouflage his shyness.

'Can I ask what you're doing around here, young man?' asked the senior Garda, 'this area isn't exactly a tourist attraction in the daytime, never mind during the evening.'

Declan stared sightlessly into the darkness as the hairs stirred on the back of his neck.

Looking back at the Guards, he replied gently, 'I live here, Guards, two streets away on New Park Road.'

Looking bemused, the officer removed his cap, reached for his notepad and pen on the dashboard inside the car and asked, 'What's your name, son?'

Declan remained silent. The officer stumbled and banged his head on the inside of the door frame.

Embarrassed now, his eyes narrowed and raising his voice, he said, 'Now listen here, young man. Across the way there, is Garda Clint

Eastwood and myself, well, my name is Garda John Wayne. We are freezing our balls off here when my young cadet and my good self should be back at the station sipping a cup of tea to keep warm. Believe it or not, we're concerned for your welfare. Look around you!' The officer twirled his head around to an invisible audience. 'Christ! I'd be worried in this uniform on my own around here.'

Pausing for a few seconds, he collected his composure and exhaled slowly in Declan's face. His breath misted up, and there was a faint whiff of mint.

'I'm just asking for your name, young man,' he sighed.

The tension eased. Declan spoke, 'Declan Hennessey, Sir.'

The officer's face softened. 'Ok – sit yourself in the car, young man. This cowboy is gonna take you home to your doorstep to meet your parents.'

The car was warm and oddly comforting. Sitting in the back, Declan couldn't quite figure out was he in trouble or getting a lift. He remained silent and didn't make eye contact in the rear-view mirror. He wasn't frightened, but he was concerned that his mother would be upset that Guards were escorting him home and knew she'd be worried about the neighbours watching a scene. As they pulled into New Park Road, Declan pointed out his home. Ratcheting the handbrake up caused the cadet to flinch.

The senior officer turned around to Declan and lazily said, 'Ok then, home sweet home. Step out of the car, young man and ask your mother or father to come out to the front door, please.'

Declan nodded and hopped out.

Turning to the cadet, the senior officer flashed an *I've-seen-it-all-before* look and remonstrated, 'Watch and learn from here on, son. This will be a learning curve for you tonight.' His last words trailed off to a grumble as he heaved himself out as the front door opened.

Geraldine appeared, and Declan spoke briefly with her. Stepping forward, she nudged Declan slightly behind her, whispering to him, 'Let me do the talking, a stór.'

Approaching the front door, the senior officer took a long deep breath through his nose and met Geraldine's gaze before he greeted her. 'Good evening, Mam,' he nodded. 'We were on patrol in town and spotted this young coloured man separating from a group of males. We stopped him and questioned his well-being, and he told us he lived here. Geraldine

interrupted him. Raising her chin firmly, she locked eyes with him and, her voice steady, replied, ‘I beg your pardon, officer; what is the term coloured?... Aren’t we all some colour, officer?... Indeed, you look a bit blue in the cold tonight, and I have no doubt you turn red when you are embarrassed. So, with respect, coloured is an inaccurate way to distinguish my son from yourself. My son is a young BLACK man! Have you upset my son this evening, officer? I have brought him up with decency and manners, and I know he won’t have been out causing trouble with his friends.’

A shocked and tense silence fell on the group. Geraldine’s gaze hardened; anger crept into her voice. ‘You’re Mary Flannigan’s husband, are you not?’

The officer’s face reddened as she glared at him like a bold child.

‘I’ll be sure to mention to Mary in Church on Sunday that you have escorted my Declan home safely, and you’ll be looking out for him from now on, Garda Flannigan.’

She tilted her head slightly and fixed her gaze over his shoulder, at the younger guard, now holding his lips tight to keep from laughing.

Garda Flannigan motioned his cadet to sit back in the car by nodding his head towards it in an attempt to regain composure. He walked back to the car and caught Geraldine’s eyes before getting in. She nodded once. Then he caught sight of Declan, standing just behind her. A broad smile brimmed across the young lad’s insolent face. With his hands on the steering wheel, he waited for Geraldine to return indoors.

As her door shut, his cadet piped up happily, ‘I thought it was great the way you kept your composure. I take it that is what you call diplomacy on the job there, Sir.’

1985

As the years went on, Declan developed many great friends and the occasional ignorant enemy. Besides his colour, another factor stood out about Declan: his unusual strength and complete lack of fear. Declan never lost a street fight, and the more he won, the more he invited. By his early twenties, he was renowned throughout Dublin for brute strength and fearlessness, but every streak of good luck must end.

Declan became involved in an undesirable gang that ran most of the criminal activities in the northside of Dublin. They recruited him as a money collector as his reputation preceded him. His conscience told him to stay away from them, and he did for a while for his mother's sake. Until six months later, after persistent invitations and the allure of money and power, he joined the gang. A fortnight into his new job, Declan's life was nearly cut short for good. A routine money collection went wrong, and three against one, he was left to be slaughtered in wasteland near Dublin's docks. The only thing that ended up saving him from being killed was his streetwise guile.

It was a painful lesson for Declan and one he was not willing to take lying down. Knowing who was behind the attack, he visited his employer, Conor Casey, a lesser-known Dublin criminal. He knew he was in too deep, but his pride was wounded. That evening, whilst the shame and the bruises were still fresh, he walked into Conor's busy pub and confronted him, man-to-man.

Within seconds, five of Conor's sidekicks surrounded him. With no time to think, Declan lunged at Conor, pushing him to the floor. Five sidekicks piled on top. Stray punches, grunting noises and the yelps of regular bar-goers forced the fight outside, which suited Declan as he needed space to retaliate. With sheer strength of will, Declan began fending off the men with vicious blows to the head. Unknown to him, Conor had at this stage emerged out of the melee and raced back inside for his weapon.

Suddenly a gun fired, and everything stopped. Declan felt a red-hot poker drive through his shoulder and realised he had been shot. He dropped to the floor and rolled behind a pool table to shield himself.

Nobody in the pub indicated Declan's position to Conor. Searching wildly for Declan around the front bar, Conor felt a kick to his ankle from under the pool table and hit the floor. The gun fell, and Declan kicked it under the pool table out of reach. Declan shot up and grabbed Conor, shoving him against a nearby fruit machine. Lights flashed and blinkered, and a repetitive jingle jeered the men along until Declan smashed Connor's head repeatedly against the glass screen. The fruit machine applauded his win, with no pay-out.

The silence started to dissipate as a few locals stood up, chuckling and clapping. Blood soaked through Declan's shirt as he leaned back, took a breath and prepared to leave. Something changed forever for him that day. People knew he was not to be messed with, and there was no turning back; he had made enemies now. Enemies that would never forget. Sitting alone, watching the sun slowly sink beneath the backdrop of the city, Declan felt sure he had found his path in life. One day he was going to own the town.

Declan set about building a trusted team around him. Word spread across town about his plans, and meetings began with a renowned local criminal, Aiden O'Driscoll. One of the meetings took place in an isolated pub in the back of the beyond. It was at the behest of O'Driscoll; a meeting Declan couldn't turn down.

'Sit yourself down there, now. RELAX. I'm not here to put the heavies on you, my man. Aiden O'Driscoll, by the way. Do you want a drink?'

'No, thanks,' was Declan's short reply.

'Good for you – keep yourself focused. I'm here to gently persuade you about how things are going to run smoothly for us both. I have a line of business that runs through Darndale that is important to me. I bet you're thinking, "Why is this wiry old goat telling me this?" I bet you're thinking, "What's in it for me?" Well, absolutely FUCK ALL, young man.

'I tell yeh; there are a lotta folk around here who have given you the gentle nod for what you've done. That Connor Casey had it coming for years. He was reckless with a drink inside him, making threats he couldn't back up. He'd squeal to the Guards as they had him in their back pocket. That's why I never challenged him. I couldn't trust how deep the Guards were into his operations. I have a small piece of advice for you, Declan. Take it or leave it.'

‘Get yourself a pub. Get yourself a few good men around you, men who you can trust. Get folk to respect you, and then everything will fall into place. Leave Casey to me. He is finished; you can start anew. Make new contacts and mind yourself with the Guards. They’ve lost their key man to what goes on in town; they won’t like that. The North is yours, and the South is mine, plain and simple. I don’t want anything to do with you and vice versa.’

Declan cautiously replied, ‘I can live with that.’

O’Driscoll waved his men away before he continued, ‘There is one condition mind you,’ his eyes pinned Declan’s.

‘I haven’t put myself through this shite to be conditioned by anyone,’ Declan remonstrated.

‘Relax! Let me explain. I have two lads who work for me; they’re brothers. You’d think they’d be as thick as thieves... pardon the expression there, but they’re always at each other’s throats. I can’t have the pairing anymore. I want you to take one of them on. He’s trustworthy, one of the best; I’ll give you my word on that,’ O’Driscoll pointed his finger on the table, reaffirming his comment.

‘These brothers will be our go-between. Keep the lines clear for us, you understand? You suck my dick; I’ll suck yours, so to speak.’

‘Sounds like you’re not giving me much choice,’ Declan replied diffidently.

‘I’m giving you a hand of experience. I don’t want you to fuck up before you’ve even got your feet off the ground. The Guards will be all over you, so an experienced hand in the team will be invaluable to you. Take it or leave it.’ Offering his hand, O’Driscoll waited.

Declan countered, ‘What’s yer man’s name?’

‘His name is Brady. You’re gonna get on fine with him. He’s an ugly fucker but don’t let that put you off warming to him,’ O’Driscoll said affably.

‘And what’s in it for you?’ Declan asked.

‘As I say, I have business interests that yer man Casey knew fuck all about, and that will be of no concern to you either. A goodwill payment will come your way once a month to not ask questions. I don’t want to associate with you at all. The last thing I want is the Guards sniffing around my businesses if you fuck up.’ O’Driscoll’s answer came out sharp. There was a pause before he spoke again.

‘Look, lad, I’m just looking out for myself. Keeping our affairs separate will mean no conflict. I want you to ensure we don’t step on each other’s toes. You have a bright future ahead of you if you play by the rules. Make no assumptions about what you’re getting yourself into here, though the Guards will be all over your backside; get a legit business, start from there, and take the advice given to you.’ He offered his hand to Declan again; it was an invitation to stand up and end the meeting.

CHAPTER 4

At the beginning of the month – payday – locals in The Telegraph had money in their pockets. Declan enticed drinkers by showing live Premier League football, then prime-time boxing starting from around 9 pm. It was expensive to showcase events live on satellite, but it paid off. It encouraged punters to revel in the excitement and kept the pumps going all night long. Around 10 pm, buffet food was offered on the house, giving the drinkers a chance to slow down to drink more later. As the evening drew in, bouncers appeared discreetly inside the bar to keep an eye on things and move on any undesirables that may have overindulged.

On Saturdays, the upstairs function room buzzed with anticipation for the evening's gambling sessions. As punters arrived upstairs, mobiles were confiscated. Drinks were served on request – these were legitimate brands – and no money changed hands on these nights. As the night went on, the brands were swapped with contraband brands poured into the empty bottles. The staff used a metallic pen to score the base, marking out the contraband, so Declan was never served the cheap stuff. If some of the players noticed the difference in taste, it was never questioned.

Declan, despite his reputation, had an unerring, though not rational, sense of fairness. Even though he happily fleeced his punters at card games each week, he always felt that presenting a bar bill to the loser was a step too far. Perched like a hawk on the edge of a barstool, Declan sat back in the shadows where he could oversee the tables and punters throughout the night.

As he visually managed the floor, card dealers kept in constant eye contact with him. Requests were made and answered by a nod or a whisper in the ear if the sum was substantial. When a punter won big, he would motion the staff to applaud them and offer them a complimentary bottle of champagne (contraband). After all, he knew the probability would be on

his side the following week for him to re-coop any losses.

Martin and Bridget's brother, David, were in good spirits from shifting boxes from a house clearance that had finished earlier than expected and headed into The Telegraph. In the early days, David accompanied Martin to keep an eye on him for Bridget's sake, steering him out of trouble. The pair soon became thick as thieves, and David rarely told Bridget any of Martin's antics. Declan often used David as a gofer to collect goods from the store and pub using a tatty van.

A relaxed doorman had turned a blind eye to two young men with a fake ID. After a couple of shandies, the gob on them caught his attention. After declining to leave and ranting the air full of expletives, the doorman apologised for falling on gobby number one, rendering him unconscious. His refusal to wake up meant that gobby number two had to carry him out and wait for him to come around.

As they entered the bar, the doorman, Billy, sauntered over to them, acknowledging them with a drop of the head. 'How's the form, fellas?' he inquired.

Martin replied, 'Bout ye.'

'That's a terrible problem to have as a trained door supervisor there, Billy,' David said sarcastically, 'all that falling over on folk.'

Surveying the crowd ahead of him, Billy answered. 'Well, I hope bucko forgives me when he comes to. When the great unwashed starts twisting hay after a couple of pints, you know they're going to be a pain in the backside for the rest of the night. Do you know what he called me? A WANKER. I nearly blushed. That's the problem with the youth of today. No fucking respect.'

'By the way, are you still after those dodgy fire sticks for the free TV service? Some have come about now with all the upgrades and all the channels. You just have to sync it now and then.'

Martin shrugged, 'I'm a bit short of cash at the mo...'

Billy interrupted, 'Don't fear, I can sort you both out for a sitting upstairs later if you're keen on some winnings.'

David offered a shake of the head before Martin piped up, 'Aye sure, why not.'

Billy obliged and focused on raised voices coming from the gents before he wrestled through the crowds.

Martin had been an avid gambler since a young man. He was very

sharp when it came to card games and had an impressive history of winning at Declan's tables, something that no other punter held claim to. David was a casual player; he knew his limit and always lost the lot but never a penny more. He was competent enough to call it a day when he lost. Martin, however, was the complete opposite, and though he lost big, he won big too. Declan was waiting for the day to recoup his losses.

The evening session drew on late into the early hours. One table remained. Martin was once again on form and close to pulling off his most significant windfall to date. David had been one of the first to drop out and was, as usual, resigned to his losses. Adrenalin coursed through Martin's veins, making him feel giddy and brave.

'I can take them, David. If I pull this off, I can buy a batch of those chipped Amazon fire sticks and make more money. I'm nearly there, can you spot me any more euros?'

'Do you take me for a bigger fool than I am?' David growled. The air was tense now, and the dimmed spotlights cast pools of light among the beer bottles cluttering the table. As elbows juddered in conversation during intermissions, ripples of light moved across the felt cloth. Martin had played it cool, and his poker face had earned him a crucial position as one of the last two players left in the game. As luck had been on his side all night, he felt he had the hand of his life. David cringed when he heard Martin call the dealer over. He knew no good would have come of it.

'Take yourself the feck out this minute if not sooner,' David muttered under his breath.

Martin flicked his wrist dismissively and replied, 'Hold your whisht, man.'

Hearing the interruption, the dealer ushered David over to the bar. Declan rose from his stool and strolled over to him casually. David's palms started to sweat as Declan's piercing eyes pinned him to the bar. He mentally berated himself for showing fear. Declan preyed on terror, and David hated to feed it. Pinching two cigarettes from a packet, Declan gestured for David to join him on the balcony. The breeze picked up as he pulled open the adjoining doors. Declan had a worrying stillness about him. He stuck a cigarette in each of their mouths and lit them. Smoke funnelled out of his nose as he took a deep drag. He spoke in an unhurried tone.

'This is the only reason you need to part your lips. Take your drink,

shut your mouth and stay seated for the remaining hand.’

Declan’s stare sucked something out of David as he returned to his seat chastened, sitting back to watch the game silently. Martin was chatting animatedly with the supervisor before a nod from the card dealer caught Declan’s attention. The room went quiet except for whispers of discussions at the bar as Martin appealed to Declan for a potential loan to cover his hand. David tried to intervene again. Declan winced and flashed him a look; David sat back.

Martin had tunnel vision and only saw one solution to getting his prize. He had recently finished paying off another loan with a revered family, the O’Driscolls. Part of the deal was that he worked for them. He didn’t know what was involved, but his choices were limited once again, and he had agreed to it. Declan was unaware of this, as was Bridget. After a moment or two of further discussion, Declan called out the terms of the loan for Martin and the other players to hear. Typically, this was a departure from the usual informal way Declan and his colleagues conducted their business arrangements and was noted by the men.

‘Right Lynch, you are borrowing €2,000; that’s €170 each month over 24 months. Are you able to meet the loan payments each month on time with no exceptions; if not, there will be consequences.’

Martin heard the words but took little heed of their meaning. He was single-mindedly focused on his win. The alcohol had slowed his senses down; his eyes had become puffy, and his face clammy. He looked up, nodded, and shook hands to seal the deal. Speaking in a low undertone, Declan muttered, ‘Just give me an excuse, any excuse, and I’ll come knocking, Lynch.’

Snatching his hand back, Martin sat back at the table, his spirits somewhat dampened. Seeking one last chance to talk sense into him, David grabbed Martin by the forearm and pleaded, ‘Please tell me you haven’t chanced your arm?’

Martin shook him off dismissively and turned back to the table to receive his chips. An unsettled feeling coursed through him. After passing the chips over, Declan moved back towards the table, pulled out a chair, and positioned himself directly in Martin’s eye line. Feeling a soft panic, Martin’s stomach shifted as his eyes blinked rapidly. As the dealer spoke, he felt his breath catch as reality started to hit. Both Martin and Declan’s heart rates quickened for differing reasons. As the tension grew, Martin’s

elbow slipped off the table, his senses dulled.

‘Alright, I’m all in,’ he confirmed. A note of impatience had crept into his voice. His heart fluttering, he pushed all his chips forward. The cards turned over. Martin tracked the turnover of cards and the players’ subtle assessments of his hand and was satisfied his hand could win the game. It was not to be. When he revealed his hand, the players gasped in anguish for him. In the cruellest of twists, Martin, was beaten. He couldn’t believe it.

He sat dumbfounded, staring at the cards. Heat climbed up his neck, and the surrounding air became uncomfortable as he struggled to breathe. His head fell into his hands. In shock, reality kicked in. He had just lost two grand. He started to sober up. The other players got up and embarrassedly patted Martin as they stumbled past him towards the exit. Others stayed and gathered by the bar, recollecting what could have been. Martin felt David’s breath on the back of his neck and knew what was coming.

David glared at him, his jaw tightened, struggling to hold back profanities. Anger crept into his voice. ‘Do you realise what you’re putting my sister through this time?’ he demanded, taking a step back. ‘She will find out, and there will be ructions – Christ, Martin. She has enough to contend with. You never learn, man. How are you going to pay Declan two grand plus whatever interest AND pay the O’Driscolls at the same time?’

Turning his head, David gave Declan a fleeting stare to check he was listening before continuing. ‘If either of them finds out you’re involved with the other – they’ll both kill you... and if Bridget finds out what you’ve done...’ he paused and bit his top lip, upset now rather than angry. ‘You’re gonna send my sister to an early grave, Martin.’ Shaking his head, he turned and left, disgust written all over his departing form.

Declan, still seated at the table, watched this exchange. He loathed Martin Lynch and had hated for years. The mere mention of his name gnawed away at him. The feelings ran far back and deep. Martin had little idea of why. It stemmed back to when they were just teenagers and Martin had courted Kathleen, way before Declan had ever met her.

Their relationship was short and tragic before they separated. Declan knew of their brief history together, but the thought of Martin’s hands on his wife made his blood boil. The fact they shared a past that didn’t involve him tore him up. Martin’s presence in his life irritated him.

Every time he saw him or heard his name mentioned, he felt the anger churn inside his gut; it was a visceral reaction. The fact that there was still contact between Kathleen and Martin, through their wives' friendship, didn't help matters. He was always on the lookout for a chance to bring him down, and now he had him right where he wanted him.

Dragging himself up to the bar, Martin slumped against the counter dejectedly. The bartender waited for Declan's acknowledgement to serve him. Unease trickled down Martin's spine as he took his drink and trundled out onto the balcony. The cold night air was sharp. Declan walked unhurriedly over to him, lighting a cigarette then drawing the doors closed behind him. Leaning to one side next to Martin, he looked him up and down. Arching a brow, he took a long drag on his cigarette and deliberately exhaled in Martin's face. His face hardened. His mind had been racing. His head conjured up flashing images of Kathleen and Martin together. Their lips kissing, her laughter. Declan's anger brewed. Suddenly, his head cleared, and his eyes sharpened. 'Remember Lynch, FIRST of the month.'

Martin attempted to laugh, but a mirthless sigh was all he managed before downing his shot. Declan's gaze was unflinching as Martin stared ahead, failing to meet his eyes. Declan smirked and enjoyed watching Martin suffer. Martin was in a world of hurt now.

CHAPTER 5

The following morning Bridget had already opened the curtains and vented the room whilst Martin lay splayed across the bed. The sheet was wrinkled in knots, and saliva stained the pillowcase. He woke up with a continuous thirst. First, he remembered who he was before recalling where he was. Sunlight stabbed him as he squinted his eyes opened and zapped inside his head, causing it to pound. The potent aftertaste of garlic soured the back of his throat as a phlegmy film sealed his lips shut. The sight of the pint of water he should have drunk before sleeping induced more feelings of remorse. He stank. He farted. It stank. He needed the toilet but didn't have the energy to pull himself out of bed. Noises and laughter from the youngsters downstairs kept him from drifting back to sleep. Sitting up, he pulled Bridget's pillow over to rest it behind his neck. 'Bridget... Bridge!' he roared.

Peering her head around the door frame, Bridget watched as he unceremoniously scratched his balls under the duvet.

'There you are, love... a cuppa if you could be so good. Could you bring it up with breakfast? The full fry up if you so please... thanking you in advance.'

A middle finger salute appeared in the doorway as Bridget's head disappeared. Shane's friend Kieran who had already turned eighteen had arrived; they were the best of pals. Martin could hear him downstairs playing the fool with Sinead. The two of them were mimicking Shane's grooming procedures that he deemed necessary before he was able to pass himself fit to leave the house. Martin groaned to himself, wondering would he ever get a break. Kieran was the son of Declan and Kathleen. Even his own home wasn't safe from the Hennesseys.

Mind you, Kieran was a nice enough lad, he thought. He was shy with little confidence, which was odd considering who his father was in

the neighbourhood. It was for that reason he hadn't many friends. Teenagers' parents had warned them to stay away from him, assuming he took after his father. His looks belied his temperament. Rising over 6ft in height, his muscle definition was like that of a middleweight boxer. His raw features and square jaw resembled his father's, but he had a natural smile like his mother.

Despite his physical appearance, Kieran lacked self-esteem and was reserved and nervous, probably, thought Martin, due to witnessing his father's brutal way of life growing up. He had been friends with Shane since they were babies, brought together by their mothers' closeness. His friendship with Sinead had bloomed not long after as he was always over at the Lynches' house. Sinead doted on him like another big brother. Despite the animosity between Declan and Martin, their wives, Bridget and Kathleen, had been friends since they were teenagers growing up in the same neighbourhood and had remained good friends throughout adult life.

Shane and Kieran were as thick as thieves since they were old enough to go and play on their own. They were always up to something, and spent most days exploring on their bikes, left to their own devices. They took excessive pride in their appearance in their late teens, but their bikes remained tatty old relics. Kieran had learnt the hard way that there was no point in having nice things around this neighbourhood. His first brand-new mountain bike was stolen after only a week.

No sooner had he chained it up than some toe-rag decided they needed the bike more than Kieran. From then on, Kieran rode a cheap second-hand bike the same as Shane's, a bike of no interest to anyone. However, Shane's was more than uncomfortable as it no longer had a saddle. Initially, it did, until one day when the bike was abandoned across the pavement outside his front door. Leaving it there overnight, one of the neighbours felt obliged to let their dog urinate over it, leaving the saddle smelling like a soiled nappy. Shane tried to clean it but to no avail. So, the seat had to go. He had gotten used to riding it standing up and only once or twice had forgotten and sat down, much to the hilarity of Kieran riding behind.

Kieran and Shane set off with no place to go as the sun warmed their backs with an energy drink as a substitute for breakfast. They rode their bikes blithely along and chatted without a care in the world. Their

usual route took them past the college grounds by Dublin City University. Around lunchtime, the senior girl's hockey team practised for their forthcoming matches. The lads had front row seats and watched the girls through the slatted fencing performing their set play routines.

Shane spoke admiringly, 'Just look at them. I think it's a crying shame they have to wear that kit. It would be perfect if they had body paint on in the form of their kit. What a sight for sore eyes that would be. Can you imagine the influx in revenue within the sport? It would be a packed stadium week in, week out. Can you imagine if the sprinklers came on at the end of each match, that would be a riot!'

Kieran chuckled, 'You've really put a lot of thought into this, haven't you?'

Shane beamed. 'Which ones take your fancy? Come on; we'll split them into two teams.' Shane bounced to his feet and egged Kieran up to pick first.

'Right,' said Kieran, 'I'll pick long-tall Sally there... there look, with the stick to ball now.'

Shane nodded in respect and smiled, 'I knew you were going to pick the high school pin-up. You're so predictable.'

Kieran looked pleased with himself. 'I've picked the best now you can pick from the rest.'

Shane challenged him. 'Look at your lass. Her hair done up to the nines. Full makeup and nail varnish on, and her frightened to break her nails. Girls like her think their shite doesn't stink. They look down on lads like us. You'd never get a shag off her until you've taken her out and lavished dinners on her for months. Even then, she'd be posting it online and looking at her phone all night, checking her social media instead of chatting to you. Those girls don't put out, and when you do get a taste, you'll have to do all the work. What you want is an average girl. A five out of ten lass. First date, you'd be able to take her to the pictures and guaranteed you'd reach first base with her for a tenner well spent.'

Kieran looked horrified, 'What's wrong with talking to them on the first date to find out what they're all about, or if both of you even like each other?'

'Plenty of time for talking shite when she's on the rag each month,' Shane countered.

Shaking his head. Kieran sighed, 'I hope you have a completely

different outlook on life when your Sinead starts dating lads.’

‘Ah, look at you, Kieran,’ Shane mocked, ‘once your face clears up, the lasses will be flocking around you, don’t worry. You’re my bro, but you’re so NEW at times, too fucking soft with the ladies. You should be shifting lasses by now, not trying to get to know them.’

Kieran stood his ground, ‘Look, I’ll do things my way and at my pace. If I think long tall Sally is for me, then I’ll get to know her before you know... taking things further.’

‘I think there will be quite a few long-tall Sally’s ahead of you in life before you want to settle down with this one,’ Shane jeered.

The pair laughed and joked about their misspent youth, reminiscing about how they used to wait for Kathleen’s new clothing catalogue to arrive eagerly. How they excitedly huddled around it, checking out all the hot models in the lingerie section. Kathleen only became aware of their attention by accident when she had questioned Declan if he had ordered some items as a surprise for her after noting the folded back pages, and he laughed outrageously at her.

She started leaving post-it notes between the earmarked pages that read ‘Respect our bodies’, but she never questioned the boys to avoid embarrassing them. Shane ended the conversation about girls as his second most pressing need came to the fore; he was hungry again and said, ‘We’d better slink off now for food before my stiffy gets stuck in this fence and I starve.’

After a lunch of takeaway chicken and chips, paid for by Kieran, they stopped outside The Swan public house. A pub and nightclub they had aspirations of gaining entrance to any day now. Both Kieran’s and Shane’s parents had spoken of its history. The lads joked about which lasses from the hockey team they would like to take there. As they loafed around outside, they saw a red sports car parked in a bay along the high street. They headed over to check it out.

‘That’s some flash car. Do you recognise it?’ Shane questioned Kieran.

Shaking his head, Kieran replied, ‘Nah, it doesn’t belong to anyone I know.’

The lads were about to be introduced to the Finnerty brothers. Whilst unknown to the boys, they were well-known to the adults of the neighbourhood. Patrick, the elder of the two, was the more considered and

by right of seniority, the natural leader of the duo. Then there was Thomas. Thomas was an individual who lacked charm in every way imaginable. Despite this, his confidence was unerring. He had no moral compass and imposed fear and pain without remorse. People who knew him stayed away from him and spoke of him having a split personality or mental health issues. He had an unhealthy glare in his eyes.

The brothers shared the same weaknesses, mainly easy women and potent weed. Patrick was tall and attractive; his hair was long and thick, and he had a Mediterranean look about him. He was easy on the eye and appealing to women and never short of their company. Thomas didn't have the same luck. He'd never had any real relationship due to his cruel nature and lack of charm. Not that he minded anyhow; to him, women existed for his sexual gratification. On one occasion, Patrick had had to rescue his younger sibling from madams who had held him hostage in brothels when he took out his cruelty on the women there. Despite his brother's failings, Patrick remained obstinately loyal to him.

The brothers were born and raised in Limerick and spent most of their youth in care. They had convictions from as far back as their early teens that escalated into their adult life. Developing a reputation in Limerick, their names soon made whispers in the netherworld. Both brothers worked for Aiden O'Driscoll and his associates. O'Driscoll had aspirations of flooding his south Dublin outfit with class A drugs, funnelling it into other major cities and towns, making him the country's number one supplier. The brothers fitted well into his hierarchy, spreading fear across the south of the city; one functional, the other terrifying. Aiden hadn't anticipated that the brothers had their own agenda that didn't fit into his plans. They planned to take over supplying the Dublin suburbs eventually, and this included Declan's district. The Finnerty brothers had an impossible task ahead of them.

Shane removed his top and tied it around the handlebars as he glanced in the driver's wing mirror. Wincing, he checked the progression of a pimple on his chin. They continued to chat as Shane leaned closer to the mirror to squeeze his zit. From the corner of his eye, Kieran saw two figures darting towards them. Before he could shout a warning to Shane, one of the figures swung his arm back and slammed Shane into the rear of the car parked in front. His body creased over his handlebars, hitting the headlights. The same assailant lunged at Kieran's shoulder and tried to

swing him up against the car bonnet. In a simple reflexive motion, Kieran blocked the swing and ducked.

Huddled on the pavement now, the second assailant waded into Kieran, kicking him as he tried in vain to get to his feet. The first guy had now recovered his footing and joined in kicking Kieran. Blood streamed from Shane's mouth as he lay on the pavement coiled up in agony. A couple of people walked past them without batting an eyelid. Kieran instinctively shielded his chest and face and stayed in a foetal position. He yelped as he absorbed the blows, crying out guttural noises that made no sense. The taller attacker backed off almost as quickly as he had come at him. Behind him, he could hear Shane's moans as pain radiated across his face from where he'd hit the road. He coaxed his partner to back off and pulled Kieran into a standing position.

'What the fuck are you doing at my car, boy?' the man demanded, shaking Kieran roughly.

Kieran, gasping for air, mumbled, 'Nothing, I swear, we were just looking. I'm Kieran... Kieran Hennessey... my father... my father is Declan Hennessey.'

Looking at each other sharply, the goons' eyes opened wide. It was Patrick and Thomas Finnerty

Patrick winked at his brother. 'Well, what do you know. Is this a coincidence or what? This is our welcome greeting, boy. Tell your father he'll be seeing a lot more of us around his neck of the woods.'

Kieran felt cold travel through his body. He caught the overbearing scent of deodorant.

Patrick continued, 'You've heard of Mr O'Driscoll, haven't you, boy? We have a spot of business with him, and we plan to be making our acquaintance with your old man real soon. Your father has made a name for himself over the years, and I respect that; we both respect that.'

Kieran didn't attempt to move. Cowering, he looked up briefly before dropping his head back down. Patrick carried on menacingly. 'Unfortunately for him, a change is going to come soon. We plan on sticking around for some time here. Getting our feet under the table if you get my drift.'

Shane tentatively guarded his face as he huddled up against a wheel arch.

Thomas shouted, C'mere, what ya looking at? Wrenching him

away from the car by the scruff of the neck, he dragged him along the pavement towards the kerb and whispered gruffly, ‘Your matey just saved your backside.’

Shane caught the aroma of stale weed clinging to his breath as he cowered.

‘If you’ve smashed our window, we’ll make sure you’ll never be able to ride a bike again.’

Before Shane could explain himself, afraid of another attack. He knew to stay down. The footsteps treaded around the car, heels scuffing the tarmac as they faded. Kieran stared straight ahead, scared to make any sudden movement. Thomas discerned his fear. ‘I bet your father is REAL proud of you. Some tough kid, the famous Declan Hennessey has raised!’ he sneered.

He sniggered, seemingly inflicting enough punishment for the time being. From where he lay on the pavement, Shane heard the sound of phlegm being coughed up and hitting the road, a car door slam, then the rev of the engine as their tormentors departed. The car screeched off along the road, fishtailing, leaving a waft of burning rubber lingering in the air. Kieran and Shane choked on the fumes as they slowly came back to themselves. Speckles of blood blotted the pavement. Their first encounter with the Finnerty brothers had left its mark.

of his cheeks, dividing his nose from his face. Scars riddled his skin, breaking up the lines that aged his face. Hearing the flick of a knife, Declan braced himself as a sharp blade was deftly placed against his throat. He gulped.

Dooley scowled, eyeing Declan up and down. 'I'm going to ask you a series of questions. How you answer them is up to you. I may not like the answer, but I expect it to be the truth. Work with me, and you might make it out of here alive. Do I make myself clear.' Declan nodded in response.

Dooley spoke again, 'That's not an answer.'

'Knife,' Declan said. Dooley dropped his chin for the heavy to release pressure. 'Thank you,' said Declan.

'You still haven't answered; I need one.' The silence solidified.

Declan's coat squeaked as he breathed in slowly before answering, 'Yes.'

Dooley paused, glancing at Declan. 'GOOD. Then I'll begin... Question one... ARE YOU WIRED?'

'No.'

Dooley waved at his men to scan Declan's body. Once Dooley was satisfied, he said, 'Congratulations. You have survived question one. Question two: have you brought Gardai with you?'

'No.'

Dooley's eyes skittered across the bar at another henchman with a walkie talkie. His response acknowledged that it was all clear.

With piercing eyes, he fixed his gaze on Declan, pressing on with his next question. 'Third question... how many men are with you outside?'

Sweat glistened on Declan's forehead. Agony rippled through his body as he replied, 'Two.'

Dooley raised his eyebrows, offended by the answer. Tilting his head to one side, he unnervingly said, 'You taking the PISS? You're telling me you've waltzed into my playground only two handed?' His jaw muscles locked in disgust. Studying Declan's face, he searched for tell-tale signs of lying or weakness. Dooley gestured for the pressure to be relinquished. Cocking his head towards the men at the front exit, he waited for his reply. Interference scrambled over the walkie talkie; two fingers raised up.

‘Question four... are your two tooled up?’

As the pain shortened his breath Declan started to laugh. ‘Jaysis!... Tooled up? They’re a pair of fucking spanners. They were supposed to back me up when the ball passed through the glass.’

Dooley motioned for the grip on Declan to be relaxed. He whispered to his men to make themselves known to Declan’s accomplices. Within no time, gritting their teeth, Billy and Johnny were escorted in and paraded in front of Declan. They quickly scanned the room for options; it looked bleak.

Declan grimaced at Billy. He spoke sarcastically, ‘Wait for my fucking sign, I said, I threw a fucking ball out the fucking WINDOW.’

‘We thought it was something that happens here on a regular occurrence,’ Johnny answered.

A blank expression glazed Declan’s face as he turned his attention to Dooley, ‘Have I passed this initiation trial or what?’ Dooley folded his arms, owning his space. Glaring at the men in pity, he offered a sympathetic smile before snatching it back.

His adam’s apple bobbed back and forth as he spoke. ‘Lord almighty! I’ll give it to you, coming down here with just the three of you. You’ve got some balls.’ A smug smile of satisfaction covered his face. ‘Now I’ve established you haven’t come all the way down here to cause me any harm; that leaves me with the assumption that you’re wanting something from me... and that will cost you.’

Easing the pain from his battered body, Declan stretched his back and replied, ‘No, I have something to give you. What I have to offer is priceless. I’ve come here as a professional courtesy.’

Dooley looked intrigued and chuckled. ‘Is that so?... Well, now that this welcoming ceremony is over, you can tell me what your priceless suggestion is over some drinks.’

An adjacent set of doors opened onto a private bar. A gleaming American pool table stood prominently in the room.

Lowering his voice to a grumble, Dooley spoke to Billy and Johnny. ‘Fellas, if I were you, I’d shift the motor and make sure it’s belled up or wait in it while I listen to what the main man has to say. This neighbourhood isn’t a safe place at night. Believe it or not, there are some unruly characters around here.’ Both men looked annoyed.

‘If it’s all the same to you, I’m still not comfortable splitting back up just yet. The car can stay where it is while your crew keep an eye on it,’ Billy said.

Dooley smirked, ‘CREW... Listen, lad-o, I’m not running a God damn cruise ship down here. Your boss man will be safe talking to me... RELAX... Believe me; if I wanted your legs broken by now, it would have already happened.’ Dooley walked off, turned back and said, ‘Now be a good girl and lock daddy’s car up.’

Johnny’s eyes bulged at the cheap jibe. Forcing his way past Billy, he lunged at Dooley only to be restrained by Declan.

Dooley turned around with a sly grin across his face and said, ‘I like men with a bit of fight in them...’